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ABSTRACT

Disruptive behavior, which can range from tardiness to violence against classmates or staff members, is a growing problem in adult basic education (ABE). Many feel that this is because ABE programs have begun serving young adults below the age of 18 who are quite different from their more mature classmates both psychologically and emotionally. Five basic techniques that ABE instructors can use to minimize classroom disruption in a positive manner are (1) communicating that the teacher is aware of everything occurring within the room; (2) demonstrating smoothness, both within a lesson and in transitions between lessons; (3) altering groups frequently and holding groups accountable for their own learning; (4) arousing challenges; and (5) providing seat work variety and challenge. The instructionally effective program is not only academically successful, but safe as well, and the key to an instructionally effective school is a committed, active leader. ABE programs can change in a way that limits disruptive student behavior. The commitment to change must be headed by a strong academic and disciplinary leader, and staff cooperation is vital. Even if age segregation of students is not deemed necessary, educators must still be sensitive to the different stages of adulthood and must learn how to address the distinctive concerns of each age group of adult students served by a particular program. (MN)

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OVERVIEW

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

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MANAGING DISRUPTIVE STUDENT BEHAVIOR IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

What Is Disruptive Student Behavior?

Disruptive student behavior" describes student-initiated acts that range from tardiness to violence against classmates or staff members. Tardiness and similar lesser offenses are common in schools; they also are easily ignored when serious problems are being discussed. However, all disruptions, regardless of perceived seriousness, subtract from already limited academic learning time, and in that respect, they create a serious problem for educators (Schriro 1985).

Adult education has been thought to be relatively free of such problems. Adults are perceived as individuals who know how to behave themselves. Also, for many years, adults were generally thought to be participating in education voluntarily; therefore, behavior was not a problem. Whether or not this is true, instructors find that disruptive student behavior is a growing problem in adult basic education (ABE). Many feel this problem has come about because ABE programs have started to serve younger adults (ages 16-18).

Why Are Younger Students a Problem?

Younger students may exhibit disruptive behavior in adult education programs for several reasons. First, they may find it difficult to reenter the classroom. How an individual behaves under the stress of returning to school is dictated in part by locus of control. Younger adults frequently tend to have an external locus of control, that is they are used to being "controlled" by others. Known as externals, they have probably not yet experienced success in a job or in school. Externals are defensive, closed to the environment, uncomfortable with uncertainty, and quick to give up. This can make them difficult to reach in the classroom (Becker, Jimmerson, and Trail 1982).

Young adults also have distinctive concerns and characteristics that separate them psychologically and emotionally from their more mature classmates. Smith (1984), in a survey of 17- to 21-year-old students in high school equivalency (HSE) classes, found that "boredom" was a major reason that many had dropped out of high school. Smith also notes that students 30 years old and older dropped out of school for more "socially acceptable" reasons, such as the need to work or family problems.

Smith (1984) found that young adults felt a desperate need to obtain the diploma, yet many believed they could succeed by doing just enough to get by. They tend to cut class often, daydream or talk with friends during class, abstain from class discussion , and neglect their homework. Their older classmates see younger HSE students as generally not willing to work hard and not very good at planning ahead.

Within adult basic education programs, disruptive student behavior tends to consist of minor or lesser rather than major offenses. Major offenses are not a big problem perhaps partly because of the voluntary nature of the program and because of the educator's ability to terminate or even prosecute troublesome students. The lesser offenses, however, continually eat away at academic learning time. Teachers waste time disciplining students, repeating the rules of the classroom, calling on reluctant students who are unprepared, and repeating what students missed while they daydreamed or were absent. Instructional effectiveness is lessened, and that is the true seriousness of the offense.

What Classroom Management Techniques Can Be Used?

Instructors can minimize classroom disruption through effective, positive management techniques. According to Kounin (1970), there are five basic technique groups that help teachers reach this objective. The strategies are (1) communicating that the teacher is aware of everything occurring in the room; (2) demonstrating smoothness, both within a lesson and in transitions between lessons; (3) altering groups frequently and holding groups accountable for their own learning; (4) arousing challenges; and (5) providing seat work variety and challenge.

Relaxation of the customary rules is characteristic of ABE programs. Some teachers develop techniques to minimize the disruptions this causes. For example, to compensate for frequent late arrivals, a teacher might start each class with a chalkboard assignment that students can work on individually as they arrive (Mezirow, Darkenwald, and Knox 1975).

For many older adolescents returning to school through adult basic education, an adult who exhibits a positive attitude toward them can be a new and stimulating experience. Instructors should have high, though not unrealistic, expectations and communicate these to all students (Schriro 1985). To combat negative effects of an external locus of control, the teacher should take an interest in that individual. During the first class, teachers should let students know what to and what not to expect, thus removing the stress of uncertainty. To make students feel like they belong to the environment, teachers should ask conversational questions and let students tell about themselves whenever possible (Becker, Jimmerson, and Trail 1982).

Educators should enlist the help of older adults in the class, perhaps providing opportunities for group work that allows the two age groups to interact. Students who want to be accepted as adults will strive to live up to their older classmates' expectations.

What Characterizes an Instructionally Effective Program?

The instructionally effective program not only is academically successful, but also is "safe." Each exhibits certain common characteristics that lead to better student behavior.

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According to Schriro (1985), the program has a leader who acts with decision, both instructionally and academically. In adult basic education, this leader is often the director. This person is highly visible among teachers and students, and is perceived to be "in charge" of the situation.

Under this leadership, teachers develop a positive attitude about the program. They plan together, linking class to class, benefitting from differing areas of expertise as well as objective views of their specific academic and disciplinary problems. Thus, a consistent program is formed and implemented (Schriro 1985).

Rules are few in the instructionally effective program but the few are strictly and fairly enforced. Because these students are oriented toward achievement of a goal, as opposed to just passing time as so many did in public schools, recognition is awarded for academic accomplishments.

Teachers are given adequate feedback on their performance and support to help them succeed. As stated before, the instructional leader is visible, providing frequent and meaningful supervision and evaluation. The atmosphere is such that teachers have positive attitudes about their jobs, their peers, their students, and their workplace.

A final task of the leader is facility maintenance. No walls needing paint are left to tempt graffitti artists. Street lights that burn out are immediately fixed. A well-kept building appears more secure and perhaps better guarded than one nobody cares for (Schriro 1985).

The key to an instructionally effective school is a committed, active leader. This one person sets the tone for all school-related behavior, providing the link that makes a safe, unified whole out of several small, potentially weak units.

How Can Programs Change for the Better?

ABE programs can change in a way that limits disruptive student behavior. The commitment to change must be headed by a strong academic and disciplinary leader. Staff cooperation is also a vital part of any change effort.

All involved must first recognize that disruptive behavior is caused by a weakness or weaknesses in the educational program, and not by an individual "troublemaker." Thus, concentration should be focused on changing the institution's behavior, instead of that of the individual student (Schriro 1985).

Smith (1984) says that institutions undergoing behavioral change should consider screening new students, providing educational counseling, and utilizing differentiated placement in some circumstances. When some of the students are very young (approximately ages 16-18), from disadvantaged backgrounds, and likely to be disruptive, age-segregated instruction should be considered, if only to ensure continued participation by older students.

If age segregation is not deemed necessary, educators still need to be sensitive to the different stages of adulthood and to learn how to address the distinctive concerns of each. Strategies for dealing with different age levels could be the topic of an inservice training program. For example, if young students are "bored," teachers should learn how to provide them with exciting educational challenges (Smith 1984).

Upon this foundation, teachers and educational leaders can utilize the specific concepts mentioned above to build a safe, sound program that makes the most of its academic learning potential. And perhaps they can help a few young students to make the most of their academic learning potential.

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